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DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO USCINCSO

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
 TAGS: OREP, PGOV, MILI, HO
 SUBJECT: CODEL JOHNSTON: CALL ON ARMED FORCES COMMANDER

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT
 2. SUMMARY: IN REMARKS TO CODEL JOHNSTON, NEW HONDURAN CINC EXPRESSED VIEWS ON REGIONAL SITUATION VERY SIMILAR TO THOSE OF HIS PREDECESSOR, GENERAL ALVAREZ, AND ALSO IN HARMONY WITH THOSE OF PRESIDENT SUAZO. LOPEZ SEES NICARAGUA AS PRINCIPAL REGIONAL THREAT; FAVORS INCREASED SUPPORT TO ANTI-SANDINISTAS; AS WELL AS CLOSE MILITARY COOPERATION WITH EL SALVADOR. ONLY NEW WRINKLE APPEARS TO BE LOPEZ' DESIRE TO TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT GOH/FDN RELATIONSHIP AND POSSIBILITIES FOR INCREASED FDN/ARDE COLLABORATION. LOPEZ HAS RECEIVED FEELERS FROM EDEN PASTORA. END SUMMARY.

3. SENATORS J. BENNETT JOHNSTON (D-LA) AND LAWTON CHILES (D-FLA) CALLED ON ARMED FORCES COMMANDER GEN. WALTER LOPEZ REYES MORNING OF 18 APRIL. ACCOMPANYING THE SENATORS WERE STAFFERS RICHARD COLLINS, DOUGLAS OLIN AND LTC. RAY BRUCKNER. AMBASSADOR, PAO, AND LABATT WERE ALSO PRESENT. THE CONVERSATION WAS IN ENGLISH. FOLLOWING ARE SALIENT POINTS OF GEN. LOPEZ' REPLIES TO THE SENATORS' QUESTIONS:

 4. ON US POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL AMERICA:

 THE US SHOULD NOT CUT ASSISTANCE TO THE REGION BUT SHOULD INCREASE IT. CUBA IS GOING TO MAKE ITS MOVE THIS YEAR. THE SANDINISTAS ARE GROWING WEAKER AND THAT WORRIES CASTRO. CASTRO IS CONVINCED THAT THE US IS GOING TO INCREASE ITS PRESSURE AGAINST NICARAGUA OVER COMING MONTHS AND HE MAY WANT TO SEND COMBAT TROOPS OR, AT LEAST, MOVE MILITARY ADVISORS TO BOLSTER THE

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SANDINISTAS IN POWER. IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT CASTRO
MAY SEND INFILTRATORS INTO HONDURAS TO EASE THE PRESSURE
ON NICARAGUA.

5. ON USG AID TO ANTI-SANDINISTA GUERRILLAS:

THE ANTI-SANDINISTAS MUST BE RE-ORGANIZED IF THEY ARE TO
BE SUCCESSFUL AGAINST THE SANDINISTAS. THEY MUST FIGHT
UNDER A UNIFIED COMMAND. RIGHT NOW EACH OF THE REBEL
GROUPS IS FIGHTING ITS OWN WAR. NEVERTHELESS, THEY HAVE
SUPPORT WITHIN NICARAGUA. THEY COULD TOPPLE THE SAN-
DINISTA REGIME IF THEY COULD CARRY OUT STRONG, CONCERTED
ACTIONS AGAINST IT. THEY ALSO NEED TO MAKE BETTER USE
OF AVAILABLE EQUIPMENT. IF THE USG AND THE GOH GAVE THE
ANTI-SANDINISTAS MORE ASSISTANCE, THE SANDINISTAS COULD
BE OUSTED BEFORE THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS THIS YEAR.

6. PROBLEMS WITH THE ANTI-SANDINISTAS:

THE REBELS LACK A WELL ESTABLISHED GUERRILLA INFRA-
STRUCTURE INSIDE NICARAGUA. THEY LACK SAFEHOUSES IN
WHICH TO STORE MATERIEL. THEY RELY HEAVILY ON AIR
DROPS AND MULE TRAINS FOR RE-SUPPLY. THEY ARE NOT
EQUIPPED TO FIGHT GUERRILLA-STYLE WAR; THEY ARE FORCED
TO USE HIT-AND-RUN TACTICS. NICARAGUA IS NOT EL
SALVADOR. NICARAGUA IS A BIGGER COUNTRY. IT IS
DIFFICULT FOR THE ANTI-SANDINISTAS TO MAINTAIN AN
ADEQUATE LOGISTICS BASE. THEY COULD HAVE MORE SERIOUS
PROBLEMS WHEN THE SANDINISTAS RECEIVE THE L-39S THEY
JUST BOUGHT. THESE PLANES CAN PROVIDE CLOSE AIR
SUPPORT TO AN ANTI-GUERRILLA EFFORT.

7. ON PROBLEMS ANTI-SANDINISTAS CAUSE IF USG AID IS CUT:

GOH IS CONCERNED THAT REBELS COULD BECOME A ROGUE ARMY
INSIDE HONDURAS IF USG ENDS ITS SUPPORT FOR THE ANTI-
SANDINISTA ACTIVITIES. THIRTY TO FORTY PERCENT OF THE
ANTI-SANDINISTAS FORCES IN HONDURAS CAME HERE AS REFUGEES
SOON AFTER SOMOZA'S OUSTER. (EMBASSY COMMENT: THIS IS
AN EXAGGERATED FIGURE). REMAINDER HAVE COME IN SINCE
TO JOIN THE GUERRILLAS. ALMOST FROM THE BEGINNING,
NICARAGUAN EXILES IN COUNTRYSIDE CAUSED CRIME WAVE --
E.G. -- KIDNAPPINGS FOR RANSOM, BANK ROBBERIES, ETC.
IF GUERRILLAS ARE DISBANDED, MEMBERS COULD TURN AGAIN
TO CRIME WITHIN HONDURAS.

8. ON NICARAGUAN MILITARY STRENGTH

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TAGS: OREP, PGOV, MILI, HO
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NICARAGUA IS BUILDING A NEW EXTRA-LONG RUNWAY TO
ACCOMMODATE TWO OR THREE FIGHTER SQUADRONS. THEY HAVE
PILOTS TRAINING IN CUBA AND EUROPE ON MIG-21S. THE
CUBANS ALSO HAVE MIG-21S READY FOR THE SANDINISTAS BUT
HAVE NOT DELIVERED THEM FOR FEAR OF USG RESPONSE. THE
USG AND THE GOH SHOULD NOT LET THE CUBANS DELIVER THESE
AIRCRAFT TO NICARAGUA. US SHOULD TRAIN MORE HONDURAN
PILOTS BUT COST TO HONDURAS IS TOO HIGH. HONDURAS WILL
NEED AT LEAST THREE MORE YEARS TO HAVE SUFFICIENT NUMBER
OF TRAINED PILOTS; PRESENTLY IT ONLY HAS 28 JET QUALIFIED
PILOTS. AN EXCHANGE PROGRAM WITH THE US COULD HELP TRAIN
MORE HONDURAN PILOTS. NICARAGUA IS ALSO PRE-POSITIONING
MATERIEL NEAR HONDURAN BORDER. HONDURAS IS WORKING ON

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ANTI-TANK DEFENSES TO COUNTER NICARAGUA'S TANK THREAT.
HONDURAS NEEDS ARMAMENTS LIKE SNAKE EYE BOMB IT IS
PURCHASING FROM US (FMS CASE) TO FIGHT NICARAGUAN TANKS.

9. ON REPRESSION INSIDE NICARAGUA:

THE SCHEDULED ELECTIONS WILL BE A SHAM. SANDINISTAS ARE
ALLOWING 16-YEAR OLDS TO VOTE BECAUSE THEY HAVE BEEN
BRAINWASHED. SANDINISTA REGIME HAS FILLED THE COUNTRY'S
JAILS WITH OPPONENTS. MAJORITY OF NICARAGUANS ARE
AGAINST SANDINISTAS AND ARE LOOKING FOR AN ALTERNATIVE
TO THEIR RULE.

10. ON USG AND GOH ASSISTANCE TO EL SALVADOR:

GEN. LOPEZ WAS IN FAVOR OF US TRANSFER OF HELICOPTERS
TO EL SALVADOR. THEY ARE EXCELLENT FOR COUNTER-INSUR-
GENCY WORK; WILL HELP GOES MOVE ITS BATTALIONS WHERE
NEEDED FASTER. HONDURAS TOO PLANS TO CONTINUE HELPING
GOES WITH TRAINING AT THE REGIONAL MILITARY TRAINING
CENTER (RMTC) IN TRUJILLO. GEN. LOPEZ IS WELL DISPOSED
TOWARD IDEA OF ALLOWING TWO GOES BATTALIONS TO MOVE 10
KMS INSIDE HONDURAN TERRITORY TO ACT AS BLOCKING FORCE
AGAINST GUERRILLAS IN UPCOMING OPERATIONS BUT DUE TO
POLITICAL SENSITIVITY OF ISSUE, GEN. LOPEZ WOULD LIKE
TO OBTAIN PRESIDENT SUAZO'S APPROVAL BEFORE PERMITTING
GOES TROOPS TO ENTER HONDURAS.

11. ON MOVING THE RMTC:

THE HONDURAN ARMED FORCES ARE THINKING OF RELOCATING
RMTC ELSEWHERE TO SOLVE RAMIREZ CASE. GEN. LOPEZ WILL
BE CONSULTING HONDURAN RMTC COMMANDER SOON ABOUT POSSIBLE
NEW SITE. HE WILL COORDINATE SITE SELECTION WITH US
FORCES.

12. ON USG-BUILT AIRFIELDS:

GEN. LOPEZ PRAISED THE QUALITY OF PALMEROLA AND LA
CEIBA AIRFIELDS. THE HONDURAN AIR FORCE IS THINKING
OF RELOCATING MOST OF ITS AIRCRAFT TO PALMEROLA FIELD
WHERE THEY WILL BE SAFER. THE AIR FORCE IS ALSO THINKING
OF MOVING ITS PILOT TRAINING CENTER FROM PALMEROLA TO
LA CEIBA FOR SAFETY REASONS (LA CEIBA IS AT SEA LEVEL).

13. COMMENT: MOST SIGNIFICANT INSIGHT INTO LOPEZ'
THINKING IS HIS VIEW THAT ANTI-SANDINISTAS NEED TO BE
UNIFIED. LOPEZ HAS RECEIVED SOME FEELERS FROM EDEN
PASTORA AND, IN EARLIER MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR AND
PRESIDENT SUAZO ON APRIL 14, BOTH LOPEZ AND SUAZO
EXPRESSED RESERVATIONS ABOUT FDN LEADERSHIP, ESPECIALLY
FORMER NATIONAL GUARDSMAN ENRIQUE BERMUDEZ. IT WILL BE
INTERESTING TO SEE IF THESE IDEAS PERSIST AS LOPEZ
DELVES MORE DEEPLY INTO THESE MATTERS. HIS THINKING
APPEARS IN PART TO BE BASED ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT
PASTORA MAY NOT BE RECEIVING USG SUPPORT AT THIS TIME.
NEGROPONTE

END OF MESSAGE

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